

Notes of online student representatives' meeting, 27 March 2018

In attendance: Adam Gac (Opera Studies, Level 4); Timothy Lloyd (Opera Studies, Level 5); Karen Ball (Theatre Studies, Level 4); Mike Lees (Theatre Studies, Level 5 and Chair of the Theatre Studies online student representatives); David Matthews, VLE Development Manager; Clarie Middleton (Principal); Andrew Walker (Vice Principal).

1. Matters arising from meeting of 27 November 2017

Action 1 (27/11/17): AW to arrange for draft learning and teaching strategy to be circulated to online student reps for comment.

AW will distribute the latest draft strategy to online student representatives after the meeting of 27/3/18. An additional online student representatives' meeting will be arranged at a date to be determined in part in order to discuss this.

Action: AW to circulate learning and teaching strategy and arrange future online student representative meeting date.

Action 2 (27/11/17): AW to explore possibility of enhancing the resource available to facilitate student communication.

AW reported on student access to Office 365: David Matthews, the VLEDM, has advised that only some aspects of Office 365 are currently integrated with Moodle. DM noted that the platform now supports One Drive, which could be linked to a Moodle account, One Note and Sharepoint. DM is further exploring space possibilities for storing and archiving collaborative work with the JISC host.

Action 3 (27/11/17): AW to discuss with online programme directors development of further opportunities for online students to meet each other.

Discussion took place about the use of WhatsApp groups by students on the Theatre Studies programmes which KB indicated were working well. It was felt that some webinar activities linked to the Symposium* would be worthwhile.

*This year's Symposium, is entitled *New Horizons: testament, transition, transformation*. It will take place between Monday 16 April and Friday 20 April.

Action: AW to raise with programme directors and Symposium team.

Action 4 (27/11/17): AW to raise matter regarding need to ensure relevance of level 5 survey to online students with the Head of Quality and to ensure student reps were provided with draft copy of survey for comment.

AW reported that a draft survey was in the process of being produced for level 5 online students and would be circulated shortly to student reps in advance for comment.

Action 5 (27/11/17): AW to raise with Quality Office staff re. need to update Strategic Plan on VLE.

The College's current Strategic Plan is now accessible via the website.

Action 6 (27/11/17): AW to discuss the possibility of uploading of external examiners' reports on to the VLE.

External examiners' reports are already available through the College's Document and Resource Information System (DoRIS) if students wish to see them.

Action 7 (27/11/17): AW to raise with Quality Office to ensure that relevant notes would be circulated to student reps ahead of subsequent meeting.

Notes of previous meeting are now routinely circulated in advance of following meeting.

2. Discussions with Clarie Middleton, Principal of the College regarding proposed restructuring

The College's new Principal, Clarie Middleton, was introduced to the students present. CM was pleased to have the opportunity to talk to online students in this way and indicated her intention to be in contact with students on a regular basis.

CM spoke further to students about the content of her recent email, in which she indicated the need for the College to undertake some restructuring of the academic workforce. She underlined the need for the College to become more cost-efficient in order to build the foundations for future growth and development. CM indicated to students that in the last financial year the College had posted a loss of £500,000 and was facing the withdrawal of some £800,000 p.a. in institution-specific funding from 2018-19. CM indicated that the staffing changes would need to be instituted by the beginning of the 2018-19 academic year.

CM stated that sadly, this restructure may involve some redundancies amongst academic staff. The next few weeks will see a consultation period to discuss this proposal and to explore any potentially viable alternatives. She indicated that the online provision fell within the scope of this wide-ranging review.

CM wished to reassure student representatives that this restructure will not change the curriculum content of any of the online courses and the teaching will remain of the highest quality.

The student reps present thanked CM for attending the meeting. They expressed their concerns at how any proposed changes might affect their experience of studying on Opera Studies and Theatre Studies. Student representatives from both programmes observed that, from their perspective, the two programmes appeared to be very lean in their operation, with a small number of permanent staff being supplemented by part-time tutors. They noted that students are not involved in the current consultation and have not been told any detail of the proposals pending that consultation but, CM confirmed that the proposed redundancies would potentially affect both of the Distance Learning courses.

TL argued that, on the basis that the content of each course was not to be affected, it was essential that the tasks now undertaken by the Director of Studies should continue to be undertaken by someone, and someone with specialist knowledge and experience. He contended that, from the students' point of view, the present Director of Studies for the Opera Studies course gives extraordinarily good value to the College and questioned whether someone else engaged on a fee-paid contractual basis would do the job as well or (if the job was done properly) would cost any less to the College. AG agreed, observing that, in his opinion, full-time engagement was essential to the proper running of the course.

TL noted that on the Opera Studies programme, students had seen in recent years the diminishing numbers of new students joining the programme which was a concern. He drew attention to concerns that Opera Studies student representatives had raised with the previous Principal concerning changes to the ways in which the programme had been marketed that did not seem to have been effective. He recommended that the College should give consideration to a review of the marketing approaches adopted by the College with regard to the programme and AG also indicated that current and past students would be keen to be involved in spreading information about the course. TL indicated that a number of students, including himself, had received information about Opera Studies from students already studying the course.

ML, Chair of the Theatre Studies online student representatives, reiterated the points raised regarding Opera Studies. He made clear that other Theatre Studies student representatives had discussed the matter with him. They felt that the programme was run by a small core of College staff and there were concerns amongst students regarding the continuity of their experience and the continued coherence of the programme if major changes to staffing took place. KB supported the points raised.

3. Additional issues raised (following Clarie Middleton's departure)

One of the student representatives raised the possibility of increasing fees on the online programmes. Some discussion took place regarding this. Although several student representatives felt that there might be some preparedness amongst a number of students for module fees to be increased somewhat, others made the point that, for a number of current students, who were seeking to gain qualifications

for professional development or in order to enter new career areas such as teaching, significant increases in module fees would be prohibitive.

With regard to Theatre Studies, it was observed by one of the student representatives that, with the opening up of full-time study on the programme there was some concern that the timing of webinars might have to change in order to accommodate such students which might cause difficulties with current part-time students.

Student representatives asked for a further meeting to be arranged so as to discuss with the Principal the plans for the delivery of the online programmes once the consultation period for the present proposals was over, so that students could be told what was proposed by way of restructuring.

Action: AW agreed to discuss this with the Principal and to arrange a date for such a meeting, once it was clear when information was available.

AW mentioned the role of the Students' Union on behalf of Distance Learning students as well as of those studying on campus. Student representatives said they had little contact with the Students' Union but agreed that it could be constructive to have some more contact, including with the new President of the SU.

Action: AW agreed to pass on to the College's new Students' Union President, Andrew Exeter, email contact addresses for Mike Lees (Theatre Studies) and Timothy Lloyd (Opera Studies) and to encourage Andrew Exeter to make contact with online student representatives.